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Is Chavez Hitler or Father Christmas? Venezuela's Handout to Uncle Sam's Shivering Poor

By Larry Lack

It's an odd, almost surreal scenario. The richest nation on earth is receiving millions of dollars in foreign aid this winter. And it's coming from a head of state who Donald Rumsfeld has compared to Hitler and a government that a recent U.S. army report calls "the largest threat since the Soviet Union and Communism."

With well publicized support and cooperation from several U.S. Senators and more than a dozen members of Congress, Venezuelan heating oil marked down to 40 per cent below the market price is warming the homes of more than 150,000 low-income residents of nine northeastern states this winter.

Citgo, the U.S. oil refiner and distributor owned by the government of Venezuela, is also selling oil to Native American communities at this same discounted rate, and is providing heating oil to soup kitchens and emergency shelters in five states without charge.

By mid-February Venezuela, the world's fourth largest oil producer, which sells almost 50 per cent of the oil it produces to the United States, had authorized heating oil discounts worth more than $30 million for low-income households and communities in the U.S. Fadi Kabboul, an energy specialist at the Venezuelan embassy in Washington, estimates that by April his government will have given a total of about $50 million in price discounts to charitable groups, Indian tribes and impoverished Americans who use oil

(**Oil** *continued on page 8)*

Did Oprah Pick Another Fibber? Truth and Fiction in Wiesel's

By Alexander Cockburn

When in trouble, head for Auschwitz, preferably in the company of Elie Wiesel. It's as foolproof a character reference as is available today, at least within the Judeo-Christian sphere of moral influence. One can easily see why Oprah Winfrey and her advisers saw an Auschwitz excursion in the company of Wiesel as a sure-fire antidote to salve the wounds sustained by Oprah's Book Club when it turned out that James Frey had faked significant slabs of his own supposedly autobiographical saga of moral regeneration, *A Million Little Pieces*.

Published in 2003, Frey's irksome book swiftly became a cult classic. (The present author was offered it in the summer of 2004 by a young relative, presumably to assist in *his* moral regeneration, but after glancing through a few pages returned it, on the grounds that it "wasn't his kind of thing".) Winfrey picked it for her Book Club in September 2005, and it rocketed to the top of the bestseller lists.

For Frey the sky fell in when, on January 7, 2006, the Smoking Gun website published documents showing that Frey had fabricated many facts about himself, including a criminal record. There were later charges of plagiarism. Frey ran through a benign gauntlet of trial-by-Larry King on January 11, and Oprah called in to stand by her Pick of the Month. She said that what mattered was not whether Frey's book was true (the Fundamentalist claim for the Holy Bible) but its value as a therapeutic tool (the modern Anglican position on the Good Book).

But by now every columnist and books page editor in America was wrestling the truth-or-fiction issue to the ground. Oprah turned on Frey. On her show on January 26, he clung to the ropes, offering the excuse that the "demons" that had driven him to drink and drugs had also driven him into claiming that everything he wrote about himself was true. Publishers including Random House, which has made millions off him, had rejected the book when he'd initially offered it as a "fiction novel". Oprah brushed this aside.

"Say it's all true" is what demons often whisper in an author's ear. Ask T.E. Lawrence. Did the Bey of Deraa really rape him? Lawrence suggests it in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in paragraphs of fervent masochistic reminiscence. This and other adventures in Lawrence's account of British scheming in Mesopotamia against the Ottomans met with the ecstatic admiration of the Oxford-based equivalent of Oprah's Book Club back in the early 1920s, after Lawrence had the 350,000-word "memoir" privately printed and circulated. He'd written an earlier version in 1919 but claimed this had been stolen while he was changing trains in Reading, on the way to Oxford from London. (Reading has surely been the site of more supposed thefts and losses of "completed manuscripts" and PhD dissertations ("I didn't make a copy!") than any railway station in the world.)

Just over half a century later it occurred to Colin Simpson and Phillip Knightley of the London *Sunday Times* to ask the supposed rapist for his side of the story. They hurried off to Turkey and tracked down the town to which the Bey had retired, arriving at his home only to learn he'd died not long before. Relatives told the

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British reporters that the Bey would not have found Lawrence appetizing prey. The Turk was a noted womanizer, and when in Mesopotamia was always getting the clap from consorting with whores on his excursions to Damascus.

It's fun to think of Oprah grilling Lawrence about his claims, freshly exposed on Smoking Gun, telling him she felt "really duped" but that, "more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of Orientalizing masochists who believed you".

But hardly had Frey been cast down from the eminence of Amazon.com's top bestseller before he was replaced at number one by the new pick of Oprah's Book Club, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, which had the good fortune to see republication at this fraught moment in Oprah's literary affairs. Simultaneous with the *Night* selection came news that Oprah Winfrey and Elie Wiesel would shortly be visiting Auschwitz together, from which vantage point Oprah, with the lugubrious Wiesel at her side, could emphasize for her ABC-TV audience that there is truth and there is fiction, that Auschwitz is historical truth at its bleakest and most terrifying, that *Night* is a truthful account and that Wiesel is the human embodiment of truthful witness.

The trouble here is that in its central, most crucial scene, *Night* isn't historically true, and at least two other important episodes are open to serious question. Below, I cite views, vigorously expressed to me in recent weeks by a concentration camp survivor, Eli Pfefferkorn, who worked with Wiesel for many years; also by Raul Hilberg. Hilberg is the world's leading authority on the Nazi Holocaust. An expanded version of his classic three-volume study, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, was recently reissued by Yale University Press. Wiesel personally enlisted Hilberg to be the historical expert on the United States Holocaust Commission.

If absolute truth to history is the standard, Pfefferkorn says, then *Night* doesn't make the grade. Wiesel made things up, in a way that his many subsequent detractors could identify as not untypical of his modus operandi: grasping with deft assurance what people important to his future would want to hear and, by the same token, would not want to hear.

The book that became *Night* was originally a much longer account, published in Yiddish in 1956, under the title *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* (*And the World Remained Silent*). Wiesel was living in Paris at the time. By 1958 he had translated his book from Yiddish into French, publishing it in that year under the title *La Nuit*. Wiesel says it was severely cut down in length by Jerome Lindon, the chief editor at Editions de Minuit. In 1960 came the English translation, *Night*, published by Hill & Wang. The 2006 edition of *Night* is translated from the 1958 French version by Wiesel's wife, Marion, and in the introduction Wiesel says he has "been able to correct and revise a number of important details".

In the *New York Times* for January 17, Michiko Kakutani wrote in her usual plodding prose, with her usual aversion to any unconventional thought, that "Mr. Frey's embellishments of the truth, his cavalier assertion that the 'writer of a memoir is retailing a subjective story,' his casual attitude about how people remember the past — all stand in shocking contrast to the apprehension of memory as a sacred act that is embodied in Oprah Winfrey's new selection for her book club, announced yesterday: *Night*, Elie Wiesel's devastating 1960 account of his experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald."

Amazon.com got the message quickly enough. The site had been categorizing the new edition of *Night* under "fiction and literature" but, under the categorical imperative of Kakutani's "memory as a sacred act" or a phone call from Wiesel's publisher, hastily switched it to "biography and memoir". Within hours it had reached number 3 on Amazon's bestseller list. That same evening, January 17, *Night* topped both the "biography" and "fiction" bestseller lists on BarnesandNoble.com.

Nonetheless, over the next few days there were articles in the Jewish *Forward* and in the *New York Times*, also a piece on NPR, saying that *Night* should not be taken as unvarnished documentary. In the *Forward* article, published January 20, challengingly titled "Six Million Little Pieces?", Joshua Cohen reminded *Forward* readers that in 1996, Naomi Seidman, a Jewish Studies professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, had compared the original 1956 Yiddish version of the book with the subsequent, drastically edited translation.

"According to Seidman's account, published in the scholarly journal *Jewish Social Studies"*, Cohen wrote, "Wiesel substantially rewrote the work between editions — suggesting that the strident and vengeful tone of the Yiddish original was converted into a continental, angst-ridden existentialism more fitting to Wiesel's emerging role as an ambassador of culture and conscience. Most important, Seidman wrote that Wiesel altered several facts in the later edition, in some cases offering accounts of pivotal moments that conflicted with the earlier version. (For example, in the French, the young Wiesel, having been liberated from Buchenwald, is recuperating in a hospital; he looks into a mirror and writes that he saw a corpse staring back at him. In the earlier Yiddish, Wiesel holds that upon seeing his reflection he smashed the mirror and then passed out, after which 'my health began to improve.')"

That said, Cohen emphasized that whereas "Frey, for one, seems to have falsified the facts of his life in order to satisfy ego and the demands of the market, Wiesel's liberties seem more like reconsiderations, his process less revision than interpretation. Reading *Night*, one encounters the birth of thought about the Holocaust — the future of history, concomitant with its study. In both versions, the book's intent is to engage not the undeniability of the

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Holocaust, but the man who has undeniably emerged from its horror."

This reverent tone about Wiesel and his work is customary. People mostly write about him and his work with the muted awe of British tourists reading a guidebook to each other in a French cathedral. In *The Jewish Press* for February 1, Andrew Silow Carroll was a bit friskier. He cited Wiesel as declaring to the *New York Times* that *Night* "is not a novel at all. All the people I describe were with me there. I object angrily if someone mentions it as a novel." And yet, Silow Carroll went on, "in the past, Wiesel hasn't helped matters in this regard. In 1972, Hill & Wang packaged *Night* with two other books, *Dawn* and *The Accident*, which Wiesel clearly identified as novels. The set's cover refers to the works as 'Three Tales by Elie Wiesel.' In a later edition of the same volume, Wiesel refers to all three books as 'narratives,' although he calls *Night* a 'testimony,' and the other two 'commentaries.'"

Though sales have now soared, I'm not sure how many people will read it now, beyond buying the new edition as a gesture of solidarity with Oprah and survivors of the Holocaust. It's certainly a strong piece of writing about the central terrible experience of Wiesel's youth, but it doesn't take a background in literary criticism to see that it's artfully and carefully fashioned as a kind of symbolic narrative about the relationship between sons and fathers (there are four such portraits in the short book) and, crucially, between the Christian God (the Father) and his Son. The style seems influenced by Albert Camus, particularly *L'Etranger*. Camus won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, one of the youngest recipients ever. This was the time during which Wiesel was reworking his Yiddish narrative into the far more terse, Camusian work, with its Camusian title.

As a piece of historical witness to the experience of the inmates, the doomed and those who survived inside Auschwitz and Buchenwald, its focus is extremely narrow, primarily on the main character, Eliezer, and his father. One learns with a certain surprise that though Wiesel's sister Tzipora died in the camps, two other sisters survived. In the new edition, Wiesel doesn't mention them.

Night certainly contains none of the context offered by Kenneth Waltzer, professor of Jewish Studies at Michigan State University, who is writing a book called *The Rescue of Children at Buchenwald* and whose interesting letter was published in *Forward* at the end of February:

"The January 20 article on Oprah Winfrey's selection of Elie Wiesel's *Night* for her Book Club was on the mark ('Six Million Little Pieces?'). Any memoir is a reconstruction shaped by purpose and audience rather than a direct statement of memory — and even Wiesel's *Night* is not an exception.

"*Night* focuses primarily on the relation of father and son in Auschwitz and in Buchenwald. When Wiesel loses his father in January 1945 at Buchenwald, he drifts into a listlessness and fog from which he emerged only after liberation. He recalls in *Night* only the terrible final days of the camp, in April 1945, when the Nazis sought to evacuate Jewish prisoners and then all prisoners.

If absolute truth to history is the standard, Pfefferkorn says, then Night doesn't make the grade. Wiesel made things up.

"Wiesel writes of his relation with his father, the presence of God, and his own survival and its meaning. He does not describe the social context in which he existed during the final months. The barracks, his place in the camp, his relation to others — other prisoners, Jews, boys — remain murky.

"What is omitted in *Night* is that the 16-year-old was placed in a special barracks created by the clandestine underground as part of a strategy of saving youth. Block 66 was located in the deepest part of the disease-infested little camp and beyond the normal Nazi S.S. gaze. It was overseen by Czech Communist Antonin Kalina and by his deputy, Gustav Schiller, a Polish Jewish Communist.

"Schiller, who appears briefly in *Night*, was a rough father figure and mentor, especially for the Polish-Jewish boys and many Czech-Jewish boys; but he was less liked, and even feared, by Hungarian- and Romanian-Jewish boys, especially religious boys, including Wiesel. He appears in *Night* as a distant figure, armed with a truncheon.

"After January 1945, the underground concentrated all children and youth that could be fit into this windowless barracks — more than 600 in total. Younger children were protected elsewhere. When the U.S. Third Army arrived April 11, 1945, more than 900 children and youth were found among 21,000 remaining prisoners.

"Wiesel since has acknowledged the role played by the clandestine underground but did not attend to it in *Night*. Fellow barracks members recall being protected from work and getting extra food. They recall efforts by their mentors to raise their horizons. They also recall heroic intervention by Kalina or by Schiller during the final days to protect them.

"Even then, many boys were lined up at the gate, to be led out April 10. However, American planes flew overhead, sirens sounded, the guards ran and Kalina, who was with them, ordered the boys back to the barracks. They were still in the barracks the next day when units of the U.S. Third Army broke through the barbed-wire fences.

"Wiesel's *Night* is about becoming alone. But Wiesel was also among hundreds of children and youth aided by a purposeful effort at rescue inside a concentration camp."

Forward slightly trimmed Waltzer's contribution, from an article to a letter. In the fuller version, which he has kindly supplied, Professor Waltzer wrote his last paragraph as follows:

"In *Night,* Wiesel writes about viewing himself in the mirror after liberation and seeing a corpse gazing back at him. But another picture taken after liberation shows Wiesel marching out of the camp, fourth on the left, among a phalanx of youth, moving together, heads high, a group guided by prisoners who had helped save them."

A photograph accompanying Waltzer's text, credited to Jack Werber, of Great Neck, New York, shows exactly that. The young Wiesel's head is high, like the oth-

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ers'. But this parable of a triumph for human solidarity was absolutely contrary to the parable Wiesel was set on rewriting in French from the Yiddish volume. In the late 1950s a man with instincts as finely tuned as Wiesel's to useful frequencies on the political dial probably would not have thought it advantageous to dwell on the heroic role of Communists in the death camps. All the more is this true in recent years, when Wiesel's most celebrated moments have come when hunkering down for sessions of amiable moral counsel with Ronald Reagan (who wanted to pretend that the SS should be retrospectively forgiven because, after all, they weren't Communists and fought the Great Satan) and George Bush, on whom Wiesel urged the war on Iraq as a necessary moral act.

One of the perennially fascinating things about Wiesel is the preternatural alertness of his antennae for the opportune audience, his sense of what will, so to speak, "play" usefully for him. This brings us, by way of Eli Pfefferkorn, to Francois Mauriac.

These days Eli Pfefferkorn, age 77, lives in Toronto. A man, on the evidence of several phone conversations, of alert intelligence and charm, he too is a concentration camp survivor. Originally from Poland, he spent some of the war years in Maidanek, then three labor camps, then Buchenwald. Near the end of the war he endured a death march to Theresienstadt in Moravia, where the surviving inmates were liberated by the Red Army on May 8, 1945. Pfefferkorn's parents perished in other camps, and he tells me he owes his life to his mother, who shook his hand loose from hers when the family was about to be deported, and told the 13-year-old to scram.

Pfefferkorn eventually came to the United States, taught, and spent some time working as an assistant to Wiesel on the Holocaust Memorial. Once an uncritical admirer, his present estimate of Wiesel is not favorable, and he sets his views forth at length in a fascinating manuscript he is preparing to submit to publishers. He was kind enough to send me some chapters. By no means short-changing Wiesel on what he regards as his genuine achievements, Pfefferkorn can be unsparing: "He's become a eulogist of the dead but he doesn't raise his mellifluous voice against the wrong done to survivors, 35 per cent of them below the poverty line in the US."

There are piercing passages in Pfefferkorn's memoir concerning Wiesel's artful pursuit of the Nobel Peace Prize which he was awarded in 1986, of his opportunism and betrayals in the murky battles over the design of the Holocaust Museum.

In *Night*, Pfefferkorn isolates a number of episodes in which he makes a strong case that Wiesel departed the shores of historical veracity for fiction. The two I cite here involve a boy playing a violin amidst a death march, and the second is one of *Night*'s most powerful scenes, the hanging of three inmates.

Of the first episode, Pfefferkorn writes: "The story of the 'violin episode' takes place during the death march from Auschwitz to Buchenwald with a short gap at Gleiwitz in January of 1945. Mercilessly driven by the SS guards, stragglers were shot at and shoved to the side road. The columns of inmates arrived in Gleiwitz, after having dragged themselves through the snow-swept roads in freezing temperatures for about eighty kilometers. Immediately upon arrival, they were herded into barns. Drained, they dropped to the floor — the dead, the dying and the partially living piled one on the other.

"The unspoken, the mute, the covert are his metier; albeit an ambiguity laced through with shrewd intelligence that would make many a professional diplomat envious."

"Under this heap of crushed humanity laid Juliek, cradling a violin, which he has carried all the way from Auschwitz to Gleiwitz. Eliezer, somehow, stumbles on Juliek, "...the boy from Warsaw who played in the band at Buna... 'How do you feel, Juliek?' I asked, less to know the answer than to hear that he could speak, that he was alive. 'All right, Eliezer ... I'm getting on all right ... hardly any air ... worn out. My feet are swollen. It's good to rest, but my violin...'

"Eliezer -- the inmate -- wonders, 'What use was the violin here?' Wiesel -- the memoirist -- does not find it necessary to give an answer to the question. Such an answer, I assume, should be of interest to the reader for if Wiesel were to provide an answer, the veracity of the story would dissolve like the morning mist in the Sinai desert. Maintaining hold on a violin as one marched the March of Death is *highly* improbable. However, a violin in the midst of human debris strains the imagination and questions memory. How did Juliek hold on to the violin on the death journey? Deprived of food and drink, when each step stubbornly refused to follow the next one, how did Juliek manage to clutch the violin in his numb fingers? Would the SS escorts have let him keep it?

"And from this *anus mundi,* suddenly the melody of a Beethoven concerto is heard, wafting through the corpses, the groans of the dying, the stench of the dead. Eliezer had never heard sounds so pure. 'In such a silence. It was pitch dark. I could only hear the violin, it was though Juliek's soul were the bow. He was playing his life. The whole life was gliding on his strings -- his lost hopes, his charred past, his extinguished future. He played as he would never play again.' This powerful and emotionally moving scene, celebrating the triumph of the human spirit over the grinding SS machinery is the very stuff that heroic fiction is made of. But is it a memoir factually recorded? Obviously, Wiesel's putative memoir, written while on a boat to Brazil, is but a recollection of experiences seen through the eye of his creative imagination. And yet, the melancholy melodies that came out of Juliek's violin were the first strains of a myth orchestrated by Wiesel and his disciples, over a period of thirty years."

A major scene in *Night*, one that contributed hugely to the book's success in the West, and its impact on many Christians starting with Francois Mauriac, was the execution of three inmates in the Buna work camp. As Pfefferkorn writes, "The fascination of Christian theologians with the Wiesel phenomenon must be traced

(**Night** *continued on page 10)*

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The Endangered Visigoth

The Rise and Possible Fall of Rick Pombo

By Jeffrey St. Clair

The banner stretched across the entrance to the Crobar – a trendy New York nightclub –read, "Welcome to the Pombo-Palooza". At the door, members of the Rockettes handed out cowboy hats to the A-list invited guests. Inside, a model clad in rhinestone hot pants and a cleavage-enhancing top that might have chastened a Hooters waitress rode a mechanical bull. On the stage, the Charlie Daniels Band cut loose with fiddle-driven Southern funk as lobbyists and lawyers, politicians and tycoons danced the two-step and drank iridescent blue martinis.

Such was the scene in 2003 at Congressman Rick Pombo's coming out party. The young legislator from Tracy, California had just been appointed the new chairman of the House Resources Committee. At 42, he was the youngest chairman on Capital Hill. Bush couldn't attend the hoedown but he sent a herogram congratulating the congressman he calls "Marlboro Man".

That night money flowed faster than champagne. Before Charlie Daniels had finished his first set, Pombo's campaign war chest had been fattened by more than $250,000, courtesy of an assortment of real estate barons, oil and mining company executives, timber lobbyists and casino operators. Many of these contributors would turn out to be the cream of lobbyist Jack Abramoff's clientele. (Abramoff now faces many years in prison for his corrupt dealings.) And that was just their opening bid. Over the next two and half years, Pombo's political accounts would be fattened by an additional $2 million from an ever-expanding retinue of lobbyists, real estate barons and corporate PACs.

Pombo's is an unlikely success story. He is a college drop-out from a dusty ranching town in California's Central Valley. He showed no particular flair for politics during his early days and, when given the chance, bankrupted the family dairy ranch. Politics was a last resort, and even in this arena Pombo's future seemed uncertain: he was not a particularly gifted public speaker, nor possessed of an [especially] engaging personality.

Pombo likes to describe himself as a rancher. He shows up to congressional hearings in cowboy boots and a Stetson. He owns a ranch, but spends less time on it than Bush does clearing sagebrush in Crawford. Pombo did place photos of himself on his website constructing a pink barn for his children's pet pigs over the last Christmas break. Pombo used to sport a thin *Brokeback Mountain* moustache. These days he brandishes a manly goatee. The new growth was detected shortly after the movie premiered.

Western myths aside, the Pombo family didn't make their fortune selling milk from their small herd of dairy cows. They got rich by buying up ranchlands and subdividing them into ranchettes for Bay Area commuters. As a member of congress, Pombo pushed for freeway projects that caused the value of properties owned by his family to soar.

Some thought that young Richard might get a job selling real estate for his uncle, who owned one of the largest brokerages in the Central Valley. But Pombo never passed the real estate exam.

Politically, however, his uncle proved to be a huge help. The red and white Pombo real estate signs are ubiquitous across the congressional district. Thus, Rick Pombo, a tubby and slick-haired man of Portuguese descent, enjoyed huge name recognition before he ever considered running for office.

Pombo has told various stories about the event that prompted him to run for Congress. For years he claimed that he was enraged by plans to turn an abandoned railroad near his family ranch into a bicycle trail which — he fumed — would lead to the entire valley being designated a "viewshed" where development would be restricted. Later, Pombo said he ran for office because the family ranch had been designated "critical habitat" for the San Joaquin kit fox, the world's smallest wild canid and an endangered species.

Both stories are embellished to the point of fantasy. Pombo's ranch was never at risk from either action. The allegation about the kit fox driving his family from their homestead is particularly outlandish, since the feds have never designated critical habitat for the tiny vulpine.

Real ranchers tend to look kindly on the kit fox, since it feeds almost exclusively on rodents regarded as crop pests. In any event, the habitat designation wouldn't have restricted ranching operations but development. And, indeed, that's precisely what ticked off Pombo. He paid $5,137 into a regional conservation fund as an impact fee for houses he built on his "ranch". The houses went up; kit fox populations went down.

In 1992 Pombo won his seat in Congress after narrowly defeating Democrat Patty Garamendi, daughter of the hugely unpopular state insurance commissioner John Garamendi.

In 1996, Pombo published a book-length screed against the Endangered Species Act and environmentalists. Titled *This Land is Your Land*, the book was ghost written by rightwing columnist Joseph Farrah. Woody Guthrie wouldn't recognize many of the sentiments set forth in the Pombo-Farrah tract, which called for the dismantling of the Endangered Species Act and disposal of public lands to private interests. Though not a bestseller, the book acquired the allure of a Gnostic gospel among the "Wise Use" crowd, whose concept of wise use derives from God's commandment to Adam in the book of Genesis to pillage the earth's natural resources as he thinks fit. The book put Pombo on the ledger as an apex berserker

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in what Ron Arnold, the P.T. Barnum of the Wise Users, has billed as the War Against the Greens.

But the Wise Use Movement's backing of Pombo certainly doesn't explain his rise to power. The Wise Users have had their congressional champions in the past, notably Helen Chenoweth, of Idaho. But they've tended to labor in obscurity, deemed as coarse Visigoths even in their own party. For his first few years, Pombo toiled in a similar kind of isolation. His speeches at property rights confabs denouncing Bruce Babbitt as an agent of the United Nations and the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone as an example of "political paganism" garnered only the occasional comical notice in the gossip pages of the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. His bills to dismantle the Endangered Species Act rarely attracted more than a few dozen co-sponsors and usually went extinct without a hearing.

Lately, though, Pombo has been on a roll. His McCarthyesque hearings on the dangers of "eco-terrorism", where environmentalists were hauled up before the House Resources Committee and forced to endure harangues from both Democrats and Republicans, have now culminated in a series of arrests by the FBI of nearly a dozen environmental activists on charges of sabotage, conspiracy and arson. Rod Coronado, an editor of the *Earth First! Journal* and probably the most famous animal rights activist in North America, was also arrested for giving a speech in 2003 at UC San Diego where he demonstrated how to make and use a Molotov cocktail.

Pombo's scheme to sell off millions of acres of federal forest and range lands, an idea once considered political poison, was adopted by the Bush administration this fall, with a proposal to dispose of 200,000 acres of public land to mining and timber companies and real estate speculators, all in the name of funding rural schools.

This fall Pombo came close to realizing his wildest dream when the House of Representatives passed his bill to annihilate the Endangered Species Act by a hefty margin of 229 to 193. Soon after this mighty triumph, the *Washington Times* announced the onset of "Pombomania" among young Republican ultras.

Ironically, Pombomania may owe more to his enemies than to the shock troops of the property rights movement. Plucking bellicose quotes from his book and his stump speeches, the Sierra Club turned Pombo into the personification of environmental villainy. In dozens of mass fundraising appeals, Pombo was presented as the new James Watt, the dark agent of the looting of the public estate. Pombo glories in his role. "I'm their bogeyman", Pombo gloats. "They need me to raise money."

The Sierra Club's threat inflation of Pombo almost certainly factored into Tom DeLay's decision to catapult the congressman over the heads of more senior members to the chair of the Resources Committee, one of the most prized seats in Congress.

Pombo also got help from the Democrats. His rewrite of the Endangered Species Act, which eliminates the designation of "critical habitat" for listed species, sets in legal stone many of the practices implemented administratively by his former nemesis Bruce Babbitt when he served as Clinton's Interior Secretary.

Since 2001, Pombo has paid his wife and his brother at least $465,000 in consulting fees from his campaign fund.

In Clinton-time, Babbitt simply refused to designate critical habitat for dozens of at-risk animals and plants, forcing environmental groups into court to compel the Fish and Wildlife Service to live up to its legal obligations. The suits were slow in coming while Clinton was in office, but they began to proliferate after Bush came to power.

Bush and Pombo used those lawsuits, most of which resulted in favorable verdicts for the greens, to charge that the law was outdated and was being exploited by militant environmentalists and litigation-happy lawyers. They got some unexpected help from one of the liberal lions of the House, George Miller, the former chair House Natural Resources Committee. This summer Miller said that the law needed to be reworked.

"There is a recognition that the current critical habitat arrangement doesn't work, for a whole host of reasons," said Miller. "There are some in the environmental community who think the answer is just no to any change, and I think that's a problem."

At those words from a politician once regarded by greens as the most enlightened member of the House, critical habitat went extinct without a fight. There were warning signs of Miller's impending collapse. Shortly after the Democrats lost control of the House, Miller gave up his leadership position on the Resources committee. Friends said he was too tired to fight the likes of Don Young and Pombo.

Another Democrat, Dennis Cardoza, Representative in California's 18th District, worked closely with Pombo to craft his assault on ESA, including a provision that is likely to bankrupt the U.S. Treasury faster than Halliburton's Iraq contracts. Pombo's bill calls for the federal government to pay off developers for not violating the law. Under this rule, the feds would have to compensate property owners for value of a "proposed use" for land inhabited by endangered species. It's a shakedown provision. A Central Valley rancher could proposed to build a casino in kit fox habitat, and the feds would be required to pay out millions to keep them from building it. Then the next year the same landowner could come back with new plans for a golf course and get another payoff.

Sound absurd? A similar law was passed by the voters of Oregon two years ago. The law was initially stuck down by a state court as unconstitutional, but last month the Oregon Supreme Court reinstated the statute, which virtually wipes out the state's vaunted land-use planning regulations.

Pombo's bill is currently stalled in the Senate, where Lincoln Chaffee, the Republican from Rhode Island, has vowed to keep the Endangered Species Act from being "Pomboized". (It may be a coincidence but one of the only zoos in the country that has a kit fox exhibit is the Chaffee Zoological Gardens in Fresno.)

Chaffee may resist his fellow Republi-

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can, but you won't hear similar objections from California's senior Senator Dianne Feinstein. She and Pombo have worked closely over the years on everything from water policy in the Central Valley (more water for farms, less for salmon) and logging in the High Sierra near Lake Tahoe. The real estate caucus clings together.

Pombo says there are other laws he wants to obliterate in the next few years. At the top of his hit list is the National Environmental Policy Act, the law that requires Environmental Impact Statements for all federal projects.

It's been a dramatic run, but, alas, Pombo may not survive to witness the promised land. The ethical noose is tightening around his political career.

Back in the 90s, Pombo made rich sport of attacking Hillary Clinton for her role in the Travelgate affair. But it now turns out that Pombo' office has its own travel-related problems. Pombo's political Svengali is a man called Steven Ding, who has long served as his chief of staff. When Pombo landed the Resource Committee chair, he also made Ding chief staffer for the committee. Ding was double dipping, getting paid by both the committee and Pombo's office.

Ding lives in Stockton and travels back to California every week. The Resources Committee picks up the tab. From 2003 through 2004, Ding billed the committee $87,000 in commuter charges. Some of those visits may not have been to see Mrs. Ding. Even though he has two positions with Pombo, Ding has enough time to also hire himself out as a private consultant to corporations and lobbyists seeking his insider knowledge. Last year, Ding earned $57,000 in outside consulting fees. On four occasions, the House Ethics Committee has cited Ding for lowballing or failing entirely to report such outside remunerations.

Ding wasn't alone, though. He was traveling down a trail that was blazed by his boss. Each year Pombo's office spends nearly twice as much on travel as the offices of the adjacent congressional districts. The biggest freeloader is Pombo himself.

Last summer, Pombo took his family on a two-week vacation, touring the national parks in a rented RV. He sent the $5,000 bill to the Resources Committee. When Rep. Ellen Tauscher questioned the reimbursement, Pombo said he was doing research. And perhaps he was. A few weeks later after he returned from his grand tour, Pombo's office leaked a white paper to the *Washington Times* calling on the Bush administration to sell off a dozen national parks.

What about Pombo's wife, Annette, whose recipe for Apple-Walnut Crosscut Pie is the most popular page on the congressman's website? Surely, Annette's travel expenses shouldn't have been covered by the committee. It turns out that since 2001 Pombo has paid his wife and his brother at least $465,000 in consulting fees from his campaign fund.

This wasn't Pombo's first infraction. In 2004, he used office funds to pay for the printing and mailing of a flier to a nationwide list of property rights fanatics urging them to write letters in support of Bush's plan to let snowmobilers run amok all over Yellowstone Park. The Ethics Committee ruled that the flier violated the rules on franking and slashed his mail budget. Later that year, Pombo gave all of the Republican staffers on the Resources Committee a paid vacation in October so they could disperse across the country to work in GOP election campaigns.

In October 2005, the Center for Public Integrity reported that Pombo had taken two overseas junkets to New Zealand and Japan. Both trips were paid for by a group called the International Foundation for Conservation of Natural Resources, which receives funding from bioengineering firms such as Monsanto, also from pro-whaling interests. Pombo did not report the trip on his income tax form, though the IRS considers overseas junkets as gifts on which taxes must be paid.

"I really have no idea what is going on with that foundation," said Pombo, when confronted with the report. "Obviously I will have my accountant check into this." Even by the high standards of congressional evasiveness, this was a spectacular bout of memory loss. Pombo founded International Foundation for Conservation of Natural Resources and served as its chairman until July of last year.

Then there's the Abramoff connection. Like Bush, Pombo now pretends to have a foggy recollection of the beleaguered super lobbyist. "I think I met the guy a few times", Pombo said last month. "But he never stepped foot in my office. Never lobbied me about anything."

Unfortunately for Pombo, Abramoff has left a distinct paper trail across Capital Hill, with much the forensic evidence to be found in the chambers of the Resource Committee, where the business of his clients was so often decided. Duane Gibson, a former top staffer on the Resource Committee, left the committee to work in Abramoff's firm, where he represented mining companies and Indian tribes. Gibson helped Pombo draft a rider that would hand over thousands of acres of prime federal lands to mining companies. Three months before Pombo inserted the measure in the budget bill, Gibson hosted a $1,000-a-head fundraiser for the congressman.

In 2002, Pombo went to bat for Charles Hurwitz, owner of Maxxam and infamous looter of redwoods and of Savings & Loans. Pombo and Tom Delay intimidated federal regulators into dropping an investigation into Hurwitz's banking practices. Most of the legal footwork was done by Gibson, who is now under legal scrutiny by federal prosecutors. Hurwitz, of course, has been a top contributor to Pombo's campaign war chest.

Republicans are so worried about Pombo's ethical dilemmas that they've recruited an old war-horse to challenge him in the upcoming primary: Pete McCloskey. McCloskey is a former congressman and a sponsor of the original version of the Endangered Species Act. McCloskey calls Pombo the "Duke Cunningham of the environment," a reference to the now imprisoned congressman from San Diego who memorialized his menu of bribes on his congressional stationery.

Add to that the fact that Pombo's district is changing, as more and more Bay Area commuters move onto subdivisions that have sprouted up on the old ranches and farms of the Central Valley.

If Pombo really wants to keep his seat, perhaps he should lose the goatee and go back to that suggestive moustache. CP

Jeffrey St. Clair's new book, Grand Theft Pentagon, is now available from CounterPunch: call 1-800-840-3683 or order online.

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(**Oil** *continued from page 1)*
to heat their homes.

High oil prices that have hurt low-income people and communities have been a bonanza for big oil. Exxon-Mobil, for example, led record performances by U.S. oil corporations last year by posting a profit of over $36 billion.

Citgo has also benefited from rising oil prices, and ironically Venezuela's programs of fuel assistance in the U. S. — and also in nearly a score of South American and Caribbean nations —have been bankrolled by the company's 2005 profits of close to a billion dollars.

In December 8,000 low-income residents of housing projects in the Bronx began receiving the first deliveries of Citgo-subsidized heating oil offered in the U.S. In a deal brokered by Bronx Democratic Congressman Jose Serrano, about eight million gallons of discounted oil were sold to three non-profit housing corporations which returned the savings to their tenants through rent reductions. More oil deliveries to church programs for the poor, health clinics, hospitals and other non-profits in the Bronx, Harlem and Queens are scheduled to continue through March.

In January, Citgo's cut rate heating oil was delivered to some 48,000 needy households in Maine and 45,000 more in Massachusetts. The *Bangor Daily News* reported that the "deep discount" on the eight million gallons of oil Citgo sold in Maine would reduce each recipient's oil bill by an average of $100. In addition the tribal councils of each of Maine's four Indian tribes (Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot) received discounts from Citgo valued at a total of $543,000, bringing Maine's share of Citgo's price reductions to over $5 million.

Also in January, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Citgo delivered about 12 million gallons of discounted heating oil to low-income Massachusetts households. The Boston-based newspaper said the average Massachusetts household that received the discounted oil saved $184 in heating costs, and estimated that additional deliveries will bring the total value of the price discounts Venezuela is offering to cash strapped Bay Staters at somewhere between $10 and $14 million.

In February, Citgo announced that its program of 40 per cent oil price discounts would be extended to low-income households and communities in Connecticut, Delaware, Rhode Island and Vermont. Most of Citgo's discount oil sales are being channeled through anti-poverty groups which coordinate their efforts with state agencies that administer the federal Low-income Heating Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

Citgo plans to offer low-cost oil to more Native American tribal governments and NGOs assisting native groups next winter. Encouraged by contacts with tribal leaders in the Northeast and also in Michigan, Minnesota, and Montana, the company and the Venezuelan embassy are inviting Native American tribes and organizations throughout the U.S. to send representatives to Washington in March to assess their needs for fuel oil or other of Citgo's oil products.

With the market price of heating oil averaging about 50 per cent higher this winter than it was a year ago, the savings Venezuela is offering have been nearly as popular with some Northern politicians as with their low-income constituents. In welcoming Citgo's assistance Bronx Congressman Serrano said "we are truly grateful to Citgo and the people of Venezuela for their generosity", and added that "it is absolutely shameful that no American oil company has similarly stepped forward to help communities struggling with high energy costs during the winter heating season." Massachusetts Congressman William Delahunt has frequently expressed the view that Venezuelan oil assistance "is about people, not politics".

"Our objective is simple–to help people of limited means through the winter," declares Citgo's president Felix Rodriguez.

Predictably, many American politicians do not share this outlook. In December, aware that relatively few Chicago residents heat with oil, Citgo offered the city discounted diesel fuel instead, as a way to avoid a planned 25 cent increase in bus fares. Despite pleas from advocates for the poor Chicago's transit authority, with support from Mayor Richard Daley, refused Citgo's offer and imposed the fare increase. (Embassy energy spokesman Kabboul says the transit authority is reconsidering and may accept another offer from Citgo.)

In February Republican U.S. Representative Joe Barton of Texas slammed Citgo's program as "politics, not charity", and authored a resolution demanding that Citgo hand over all records pertaining to its insidious discount fuel oil program to Congress.

While Venezuela's unprecedented gift of foreign aid to the world's only superpower has drawn condemnation from right-wing politicians, bloggers and pressure groups (and even inspired more than 37,000 email pledges to boycott Citgo), it has so far failed to provoke the furious condemnation and interference that might have been expected from the White House. This could be because over10 per cent of the foreign oil that helps keep the U.S. economy viable is supplied by Houston-based Citgo, which operates oil terminals in 25 U.S. ports, refineries in Louisiana, Georgia, Texas, Oklahoma, Illinois and New Jersey and a network of more than 14,000 U.S. gas stations.

With a few exceptions, GOP members of the House and Senate, like most of their Democratic counterparts, have tacitly accepted the position that keeping the home fires burning for poor Americans trumps Bush administration efforts to turn the heat up on the Chavez government.

Curmudgeonly grousing that Venezuela's oil largesse is simply a publicity stunt intended to embarrass Bush and curry favor with the American people has not dampened the enthusiasm of an eager crowd of state and tribal governments that is still lining up to request Citgo's oil discounts for their constituents.

It's difficult for even hard-hearted conservatives to find a way to argue with Citgo CEO Felix Rodriguez' explanation of his company's oil price allowances for the poor. At the ceremony celebrating his company's deal with Massachusetts, Rodriguez explained that "our objective is simple–to help people of limited means

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through the winter."

"We aren't doing this to score points with anyone, and we're not using oil as a political weapon" says energy envoy Kabboul. "This (U.S. program) is just part of our commitment to assist people in need throughout the Americas", he says. "It's an element of broader hemispheric initiatives that supply oil products at varying favorable rates to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay and 15 Caribbean island nations.

"Our motivation is humanitarian, but truthfully it's also partly political. With this (U.S.) assistance we're trying to show that Venezuela has no antagonism toward the United. States or its people, and we also hope to make it clear that Venezuela has a different approach to how businesses should work. Our government believes that business exists first to serve human needs, not just to generate profits. We believe in justice and fair trade among nations, and oil-producing countries are in an especially good position to accomplish this, especially now when oil companies are making such large profits. We hope our oil assistance program will motivate others in the oil business to be socially responsible and use some of their profits to help people in need."

According to Kabboul (whose Arabic name derives from his family's origins in Lebanon), Venezuela's program of heating oil assistance for poor people in the U.S. was first conceived after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, when Venezuela provided 2.5 million barrels of gasoline from its nearby refineries at market prices to alleviate shortages during the relief effort in Louisiana and Mississippi. Then last September when President Chavez addressed the summit of world leaders at United Nations headquarters in New York, he also visited some of the city's poorest neighborhoods and learned about the grinding poverty that many New Yorkers in the city's housing projects and ghettos face. Subsequently his government decided that the discounts its oil monopoly, Petroleos de Venezuela, was offering to low-income people in other Latin America countries should be extended to needy communities, families and individuals in the U.S.

Meanwhile in late October, when the aftermath of Katrina and Rita had pushed oil prices to unprecedented levels, Democratic Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island, New York's Hillary Clinton and ten other U.S. Senators sent a letter to top officials at some of America's largest oil companies, including Exxon-Mobil, Chevron, Conoco-Phillips and several others, including Citgo, asking them to consider donating a portion of their profits to assist people and communities suffering from the effects of skyrocketing oil prices.

Only Citgo responded to the letter. The company expressed its willingness to help, setting off a flurry of high-level consultations involving more than a score of progressive U.S. politicos including Congressmen Serrano and Delahunt, former Massachusetts representative Joseph P. Kennedy II and independent Congressman Bernie Sanders of Vermont. Within weeks initial talks involving politicians and their staffs, anti-poverty activists, and representatives of Citgo produced a series of agreements to accept assistance from the country that the Bush administration was busy demonizing as the totalitarian twin of the unspeakable communist regime in Havana.

Some of Venezuela's critics have suggested that its programs of foreign assistance have ignored the needs of the Venezuelan people, 70 per cent of whom–over 17.5 million–still live in poverty. But a close look at the reality of Venezuela under Chavez indicates that this criticism doesn't seem to fit the facts.

Terry Gibbs, a political scientist at Cape Breton University, Sydney, Nova Scotia travels frequently to Venezuela in an effort to understand the Chavez government's so-called "Bolivarian Revolution". In an article in the current *Third World Quarterly* , she details how Venezuela's social programs, often carried out in cooperation with the government of Cuba, but largely financed by Petroleos de Venezuela, are benefiting the poor in Venezuela.

By 2005, Gibbs notes, the *Barrio Adentro* Mission (program) had underwritten the placement of "more than 20,000 Cuban doctors, health workers and physical trainers" in poor communities in Venezuela and made medical services available to 17 million Venezuelans who previously had no access to health care. Gibbs adds that "in addition to being able to access clinics, poor Venezuelans can now purchase drugs at an 85 per cent discount". To reduce dependence on the Cuban health workers who return to Cuba after working for several years in Venezuela, Chavez' Ministry of Health is currently training about 1100 Venezuelan physicians and 2500 other health care workers.

Turning to education, Gibbs writes that by employing a Cuban-designed program that teaches basic literacy in seven weeks the Chavez government has reduced the country's rate of illiteracy by 90 per cent. "This program", she explains, "has also enabled the 1.2 million people who have become literate to continue their studies through grade six", and also to acquire computer skills.

Gibbs points out that under Chavez 3500 Venezuelan schools have received major renovations, the number of days that many of the country's poorest students attend classes has been increased from 170 to 200, some 770,000 adults have completed their secondary education, and the Chavez government has decentralized higher education, opening the multi-campus Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV), where students get a liberal arts education and train for professions such as law and journalism while attending classes in lecture halls that were formerly the luxurious offices of Venezuela's oil elite.

The situation of Venezuela's majority poor population is also eased by Petroleos de Venezuela's policy of keeping the price of gas in Venezuela at 14 cents a gallon, far lower even than the subsidized prices that consumers pay in other oil producing countries.

In the conclusion of her article Terry Gibbs portrays Venezuela's "Bolivarian alternative" as a different take on globalization, one that "involves a redistribution of wealth to the poorest countries" and is "challenging the control of domestic elites" throughout Latin America.

Little wonder that the Bush administration sees Venezuela as the biggest threat since Soviet communism. By assisting the poor in the U.S. and other countries the Chavez government confirms the views expressed by Venezuelan-American attorney Eva Golinger. who recently said "the only threat that Venezuela presents to the United States is that of a good example." CP

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(**Night** *continued from page 4*)

back to a hanging that the 16-year-old Eliezer witnessed in Auschwitz."

In the incident, two adults and a little boy are being led to the gallows. The little boy refused to betray fellow inmates who have been involved in an act of sabotage; to protect his fellow inmates, the boy is willing to pay with his life. Each one climbs to his chair and his neck is slipped into the rope's noose. The scene continues as follows in the 1960 English version of *Night*:

"The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. 'Long live Liberty!' cried the adults. But the child was silent.

"'Where is God? Where is He?' someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

"'Bare your heads!' yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping. 'Cover your heads!' Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive.... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is — He is hanging here on this gallows…'"

Not surprisingly, the graphically described hanging scene has been etched into the imagination of the Christian theologians because of the numerous parallels to the Crucifixion of Jesus.

Now, while he was working on the memoir, *La Nuit*, Wiesel had cause, on behalf of an Israeli newspaper, to visit and interview Francois Mauriac, the Catholic writer and Nobel Laureate in literature. They got on well. Then Wiesel gave him the manuscript of *La Nuit*. Mauriac found in it an answer to his own anguish at descriptions of the mass slaughters in the death camps, particularly of children.

Mauriac fastened instantly on, in Pfefferkorn's words, "a resemblance between the crucifixion and Wiesel's description of the young boy's hanging. In response to Wiesel's questioning of God's benevolence and man's humanness, Mauriac writes the following in his Foreword to *Night:* 'And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, who may have resembled him -- the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world?'"

Pfefferkorn continues:

"The hanged child dangling on the rope is reflected in Eliezer's eyes, whose image resembles that of the crucified Jesus. Thus in one stroke, Mauriac has drawn a triptych reminiscent of the medieval paintings, making young Eliezer the link connecting the two watershed events in the history of Western civilization, namely the Crucifixion and the Holocaust. Mauriac leaves no doubt as to his Christological interpretation of the Auschwitz hanging. In the year 1960, he published a biography of Christ entitled *The Son of Man* dedicated to 'E.W. who was a crucified Jewish child, who stands for many others.'

"Mauriac explains what it was in his interview with Wiesel that drew him so powerfully to the young Israeli: 'That look, as if a Lazarus risen from the dead, yet still a prisoner within the grim confines where he had strayed, stumbling among the shameful corpses.' Wiesel's painfully gaunt demeanor set against the backdrop of the concentration camps' corpses have inspired a generation of Christian theologians to view Wiesel as a latter day Lazarus.

"It is *highly* speculative to suggest that from the very inception of his writing, Wiesel consciously laboured to present himself to the Christian world as a composite of a Christ Lazarus figure. However, once the seeds of the myth were sown in Paris at Mauriac's instigation, and took roots in the soil of Christian America, Wiesel has done his share to encourage the 'Lazarus risen from the dead parallel.' But Wiesel has done so more by gesture than act, silence than utterance, indirection than direct statement. The unspoken, the mute, the covert are his metier; albeit an ambiguity laced through with shrewd intelligence that would make many a professional diplomat envious."

In a letter to David Hirsch dated October 6, 1994, Alfred Kazin writes that at the beginning of their friendship, "I liked him [Wiesel] enormously, and I was in awe of him because of his suffering in Auschwitz." But at the same time "... it was impossible, when he expanded at length about his experiences under the Nazis, it was impossible to miss the fact that he was a mystifier".

One who says he directly observed the hanging scene described by Wiesel was Zygfryd Halbereich, who testified at the Auschwitz State Museum on October 19, 1973. Halbereich's testimony was matter-of-fact, clear and direct. He was acquainted with the three inmates and knew about their escape plans.

When it comes making literature Frey and Wiesel were both in the business of artistic and emotional manipulation, of dressing fiction up as truth.

"On the whole," Pfefferkorn writes, "Halbereich's testimony is in agreement with Wiesel's narrative, and differs only in one minor detail. … But this is an inconsequential disagreement that does not change the substance of the hanging story. What does affect it, however, is the age of one of the condemned, as given by Wiesel. And the age of the condemned is the crux of the matter.

"In the original Yiddish *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* and in the French and the English translations, one of the three condemned is frequently referred to as a child or a young boy. Halbereich is silent about the ages of the condemned, and this omission is surprising. For in Wiesel's painfully elaborate description of the hanging, the young boy's execution stirred up deep emotions among the inmates standing on the roll call. The Kapo who was assigned to administer the hanging '… excused himself from serving

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as a hangman. He did not want to hang a child.' A Kapo's refusal to obey an SS order was tantamount to a death sentence. His extraordinary behaviour would have certainly registered with Halbereich, whose testimony is meticulously detailed. Halbereich's silence on the Kappo's courage calls into question Wiesel's account of the hanging. One of the skeptics is the known Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg, who is, in his own words, a seeker of truth.

"Cautious by temperament and scholarly discipline, Hilberg gingerly raises the issue related to the hanging scene. In a review written for the *Boston Globe* about Wiesel's autobiographical book All *Rivers Run to the Sea,* Hilberg makes mention of the three hangings. 'Describing the incident in his [Wiesel's] book *Night,*' Hilberg notes, 'he recalled someone behind him asking: Where is God? At that moment Wiesel believed that one of the three was a boy, and in his mind identified the child with God.' Citing Kazin's contention that the entire event is fiction, Hilberg concludes, 'To be sure, the doubters may claim a concession.'"

Pfefferkorn's considered judgement is harsh on Wiesel's claims for the absolute truth to life of *Night*:

"If the hanging scene turns out contrary to Wiesel's description in his purported memoir *Night,* a fictionalized episode as Kazin claimed and surmised from Halbereich's testimony, then Wiesel's entire moral and theological edifice collapses, bringing down with it the 'Suffering Servant' theology, which first gave him recognition and eventually led him to fame.

"Though it is virtually impossible to verify the exact ages of the condemned, it must be noted, as Hilberg observed, that in Wiesel's recent autobiography 'the suffering body is no longer that of a boy.'"

Quite aside from the theological questions, part of the impact of the scene derives from Wiesel's description of this boy whose weight was too insubstantial for the noose to swiftly strangle him. Does this, in the last analysis, really matter? It does if you are disobligingly contrasting Frey to Wiesel's "apprehension of memory as a sacred act". All the same, I don't suppose Smoking Gun would ever gleefully feature the third victim's birth certificate.

After talking to Eli Pfefferkorn and reading chapters from his memoir, I called Raul Hilberg, now 80, at his home in Burlington, Vermont.

"From a purely academic viewpoint", Hilberg began, "it would be interesting to have a scholarly edition, comparing the Yiddish version with subsequent translations and editions, with appropriate footnotes, Wiesel's comments etc. He was addressing two entirely different audiences, the first being the Yiddish-speaking Jews, members of the world of his youth whom he addressed in nineteenth-century terms. There's more detail, more comment. I made that suggestion to Wiesel and he didn't react favorably."

Hilberg turned to the crucial scene: "I have a version of the hanging from an old survivor with the names of all three adults." That survivor had said that there was no boy among the three. Hilberg mentioned this in a review of *Night*, in which, he told me, "I made no secret of our differences. But whereas it [the age of the central figure in the hanging] may seem somewhat small, it makes a very big difference to Christians, particularly Catholics, because it's very clear that mystics are intensely interested in the scene because it seems to replicate the crucifixion. It made a considerable impact. So the fact that this figure may not have been a boy at all is disturbing."

"It would appear", Hilberg went on, "from the record I have, that some witnesses have questioned whether this scene took place. I have a long statement by an older man, a man whom I judge to be quite trustworthy, though one must always remember that things are sometimes observed or heard about later. I talked recently to a survivor of that section of the camp who said it [the hanging of the three] didn't take place, but maybe it took place earlier. I don't know. Dating these things is hard for survivors. Some have doubted this would have taken place. Buna was a work camp, so this other survivor, a PhD in history and an intelligent man, didn't believe it. I said to him, 'How do you know this didn't happen?' I consider it not only a possibility but plausible. But age is a big issue to some people. That's something he did not discuss in the new edition of the book."

"Wiesel's is the most read of all Auschwitz memoirs", Hilberg remarked, "not only because of its brevity but because it has something mystic, surrealistic in it." He mentioned the episode of the little boy playing the violin, and said how it evoked images from the Russian-Jewish mystic painter Chagall, also of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

"Wiesel comes from Sighet, a city in Romania. In Sighet there were many religious Jews, also Ukrainians. Much of Sighet was rather primitive at the time Wiesel was growing up. Most roads were not paved. It was shtetl life. However an assimilated group of Jews was emerging. I went there when I was 11, in 1937, and spent the summer. There was a tennis court, very middle-class. My aunt and her husband, a Sigheti, manufactured violins in Sighet where there was a major tradition of violin playing. I heard quartets in our garden. Wiesel's parents had a store. So in some respects Sighet was very nineteenth century, and in others there were all the earmarks of a group of Jews emerging into the twentieth century who were evidently wide awake to modern civilization. So was the violin scene realistic, or was it a fantasy? Certainly, for Jews the violin was the instrument of choice. It was portable.

"So I would not say that the violin scene is impossible, even though I know

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someone from the death march who said it was utterly impossible. He was in Auschwitz, also Wiesel's age. But that still doesn't mean it didn't happen. Nothing is inconceivable.

"The model of all survivor accounts is of an idyllic childhood, then the hell of the Holocaust, then since they survived they underline the fact that it was only by luck they survived. With Wiesel, his original title was *And the World Was Silent*. It's accusatory. *Night* is more surreal and mystic. It goes back to Middle Ages. Wiesel fits right into that style. It's not a novel, but what it does have is the imprint of someone who wants to leave behind the impression that if you weren't there, you cannot know what it was like, but then that dooms trying to write what it was like."

I asked Hilberg what accounts of the death camps and the Holocaust did he admire most. "That really depends on the reader. I don't have that kind of favorite. For my purposes, obviously they have to be correct. There's an account by Filip Mueller, who was on the gas chamber detail in Auschwitz in 1942, written in collaboration with two people: *Eyewitness Auschwitz*. It has to be read with care. Another book is Rudolf Vrba's *I Cannot Forgive*, written with Alan Bestic. Vrba escaped from Auschwitz. He became professor of pharmacology at the University of British Columbia. This is the most remarkable of survivors, a man of absolutely incredible energy and abilities. In sheer ability to cope with the situation, this man is beyond belief."

I didn't press the point, but Hilberg did not include *Night* in this little list.

"In 1981," Pfefferkorn remembers, "Wiesel invited me to give a talk to his seminar students at Boston University. In the course of my talk, I discussed the relationship between memory and imagination in a number of literary works. I then pointed out the literary devices he used in *Night,* devices, I stressed, that make the memoir a compelling read. Wiesel's reaction to my comments were swift as lightning. I had never seen him as angry before or since. In the presence of John Silber, the then President of Boston University, and my own Brown University students whom I invited, he lost his composure, lashing out at me for daring to question the literalness of the memoir. In Wiesel's eyes, as in the eyes of his disciples, *Night* assumed a level of sacrosanctity, next in importance to the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. In terms of veracity, it is a factually recorded work, virtually meeting Leopold von Ranke's benchmark of historical accounts: *Wie es eigentlich gewessen,* how it really was."

Frey and Wiesel are both in the business of artistic and emotional manipulation.

As he roosts on his pile of gold amid the abuse of Oprah and the literary world, Frey can comfort himself with the thought that *Night* is not how "it really was", and that even though there is a vast gulf between what Wiesel actually endured and Frey's lies about his own life, when it comes making literature he and Wiesel were both in the business of artistic and emotional manipulation, of dressing fiction up as truth.

Beyond that, looking at the man's career overall, I'd say that as a moral fabulist, Wiesel has far more to answer for. Should not Oprah ask him about the millions he could have helped with the moral stature won by the Nobel peace prize he so unrelentingly campaigned for, but whom he has betrayed for reasons of base political calculation? As Pfefferkorn stresses, you didn't survive in the death camps just by luck.

"Securing a spot in a desirable labor detail, for instance, involved shoving to the head of the line, seen as a risk worth taking. Upon encountering opposition, however, one had to know when to retreat into the chameleon-pyjama-like background of the concentration camp. This was also true about lining up for soup. Finding the right spot in the line could mean a thicker bowl of soup -which may add a week's longevity, but this entailed rough elbowing, as well as timing."

Time and again you look up, and here comes Wiesel again, lugubrious as ever, his eyes filled with timeless suffering, but with the thicker bowl of soup. CP

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